

CHRISTIANS AND FASCISM

AN ADDRESS given by KEN LEECH, Rector of St. Matthew,
Bethnal Green, London at a public meeting against
Fascism at Toynbee Hall, London, 1977.

The danger in meetings of this type is twofold: First, that we speak only to the converted and committed; and, secondly, that we do not talk about Fascism at all.

The first does not matter provided that the result is some clearly thought-out strategy. The second is a real danger, and we need to be clear what we are talking about. Fascism is not racism, it is not dictatorship, nor increased police power. Fascism is more than all these: it is the inevitable development of capitalist society if it does not move towards socialism.

So Fascism is not a plot: it is the logical result of certain processes of development. It is a phenomenon of industrial society in service social and economic crisis, confronted with the threat of collapse on the one hand, and with the threat of socialism on the other, and containing a very frightened and threatened middle class.

AT FIRST SIGHT....

The essential point to grasp is that in the initial stage it is not all obvious that we are dealing with a moment or a process which is evil, sinister or nasty.

It can appear very plausible and highly moral. So early Fascism appears primarily to the middle class and the inhabitants of suburbia. Listen to this appeal:

"The streets of our country are in turmoil. The universities are filled with students rebelling and rioting. Communists are seeking to destroy our country. Russia is threatening us with her might, and the republic is in danger. Yes, danger from within and without. We need law and order. Without it our nation cannot survive."

Who is this? Mrs. Thatcher? Powell? Rhodes Boyson? The Festival of Light? The Archbishop of Canterbury? Lord Chalfont? No: Adolf Hitler in 1932.

It is a popular and plausible appeal, and it has a great attraction to those decent people who are prepared to exchange justice and freedom for a measure of decency and security. It has a particular appeal to those who feel betrayed by mainstream politics, and it is into the vacuum that fascism will quickly step.

The churches and religious people may be particularly vulnerable to the appeal of Fascism at two points. First, when religion degenerates into pietism and sentimentality. Lutheran pietism at the time of Hitler's rise was otherworldly, drawing a sharp distinction between the Kingdom of

God (otherworldly, spiritual) and the affairs of this world. Secondly, when religion is allied with a dying social order, so that it comes to care more about its privileges than its theology.

The record of the church vis-a-vis Fascism is ambivalent. One has on the one hand the long history of compromises and support for repressive regimes - Hitler, Mussoline, Salazar, Franco, the present regimes in Latin America, and on the other the record of witnesses and martyrs, many of them clergy and bishops, in resistance to these regimes.

Perhaps one sees two types of Christianity which indicate the really divide within the Christian World.

I stress very strongly the appeal of fascism to the decent because it is easy to be carried away by the need to oppose and expose the really vicious forms of Nazi ideology which are now being revived. The Crusade Church of Tunbridge Wells, for example, will supply you with the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, as well as the works of Goebbels and Heinrich Hoffmann's "Hitler Was My Friend".

TOWARDS FASCISM

I want to suggest that there are five areas of activity which contribute to the growth of a Fascist movement, often uninentionally, and which call for careful analysis and scrutiny.

The first is that of religious movements which confuse Christianity with western society and its values. There are many Christians who are willing to exchange justice for decency, and who because although highly moral, they lack theology depth, can be easily conned by apparently moralistic movements. (It is here that the stress on the sexual area can be very dangerous.)

Secondly, there are movements which attempt to identify and attack minorities and lay blame on them in a blanket way. It is not just blacks and Asians but a whole scape-goating process which can be extended to squatters, the Irish, the mentally ill, youth, the unemployed, the poor-anybody, in fact, who forms a threat.

This scapegoating mechanism does not depend on numbers: the Jewish population of Germany was one per cent when Hitler decided that zero per cent should be the maximum tolerable level.

Thirdly, and perhaps most dangerous because most financially powerful, there is the activity of those strong vested interest which organise to defend the established structures and to resist threats to their security and power. These may include anti-trade union groups, attacks on the welfare state, and para-military defence organisations of type supported by General Sir Walter Walker. The National Association for Freedom, Aims for Freedom and Enterprise (formerly Aims of Industry) and similar well-financed groups are obvious examples.

Fourthly, there are the international anti-Communist movements, often financed from Korea, Taiwan, and the United States.

Finally, there are the grass-roots racilist and "populist" organisations which exploit fears and resentments as well as entirely genuine wrongs at the local level and organise them into racial hatred and intolerance.

All these are important, but the point I want to stress is that they are not the sum total of the problem. The problem of the respectable suburban appeal of Fascism is far, far greater.

POSITIVE ACTION

Finally, four tasks which are urgent in response to creeping Fascism.

The first is the need for rigorous and continuous analysis of what is happening, for disciplined monitoring of the activities of racist and fascist groups. No response can be effective which is not based on accurate data.

Secondly, a recognition that one cannot fight fascism without building socialism. Some will dissent from this view, but I stand by it. If there is not a movement towards socialism, then fascism of some kind, given the character of our capitalist society, is inevitable.

Nor is it enough to say that we fight fascism first and build socialism afterwards. Fascism flourishes in the absence of socialism: the creation of a socialist society is the only really effective way to defeat fascism.

Thirdly, there needs to be local action in the deprived and neglected areas which are the breeding ground for fascist groups. Often anti-fascists appear in these districts to be do-gooders and political activists from elsewhere who come for a season but are uninvolved in the real day-by-day lives of the people.

By contrast, the fascist groups sometimes seem to them at least to understand the plight of these areas. To be a professional anti-Fascist is no good: there needs to be a deep involvement in such issues as health care, tenants' rights, the care of the old and lonely, and so on. We need to be people who care more about the social evils which provide the raw material for racism and fascism than the racists and fascists do. In short, fascism cannot be defeated from a distance by people who are remote from the problems it manifests.

Finally, the message to the churches must surely be that at a time of growing anti-Semitism, the Church must rediscover its essentially Jewish roots and the Jewish basis of its Gospel. Enshrined in the Law of Moses in the theme of the "Year of Jubilee", the expression of a hope for justice and freedom for this earth, its land and its people.

In our "Jubilee Year" of 1977, we heard a great deal of sentimental rubbish and little of the true meaning of Jubilee. It is useful therefore to recall the words of Father Steward Headlam, once a curate in Bethnal Green, on the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria:

"The Queen's Jubilee is good: but the people's Jubilee is better... For the Jubilee of the Hebrews... was the Jubilee of a whole people... Liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.' That is the ideal of a true Year of Jubilee.... restoration to the disinherited of their share in the land which the Lord their God giveth them and of which the injustice of their brother man has despoiled them."